

Quack This Way: David Foster Wallace & Bryan A. Garner Talk Language and Writing

A REVIEW BY JOHN BROWNING

THERE IS A DELICIOUSLY VOYEURISTIC QUALITY TO READING *Quack This Way* (RosePen Books, 2013). For any lover of the English language and its usage, it is the equivalent of being a baseball fan eavesdropping on a hypothetical discussion about hitting technique between Ted Williams and Hank Aaron. The slim, 137-page volume is an edited transcript of a Feb. 3, 2006, interview at the Hilton Checkers Hotel in Los Angeles and manages to be both a casual, if erudite, conversation and a master class in effective writing. Bryan A. Garner, a Texas-licensed lawyer commonly referred to as America's leading authority on legal writing and English usage and the author of more than 20 books, met David Foster Wallace after the novelist and essayist published a lengthy, glowing review of Garner's *Dictionary of Modern American Usage* in *Harper's Magazine* in August 2001. Wallace was already a literary rock star, having earned national attention for his novel *Infinite Jest* as well as his influential essays. The burgeoning friendship between the two even played a role in Garner's best-known collaboration; U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia agreed to be interviewed by and later to co-author a book with Garner after reading Wallace's review in *Harper's* (Garner and Scalia have since co-written a second book).

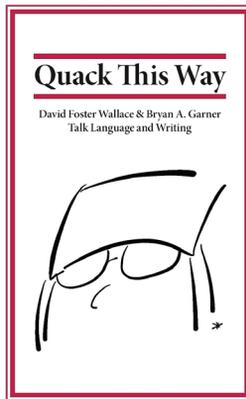
The connection between Garner and Wallace eventually led to the interview that forms the core of this book. But it is hardly a formalistic one like many Garner has conducted with noted federal and state judges in which he serves as mere moderator; rather, it is interactive—an intellectual give-and-take between two writing giants. While the focus is not legal writing per se, lawyers and anyone who values good, effective written communications will benefit from reading this book. Reminding the audience that “the reader cannot read your mind,” Wallace and Garner break down the importance of moving away from writing that is self-centered or self-justifying, a trait often found in academic writing and legal prose that have “become as much or more about presenting one's own qualifications for inclusion in the group than transmission of meaning.”

Besides the suggestion to keep the reader and his or her level of patience or understanding foremost in mind, the book offers a wealth of practical advice in a compressed space. Wallace stresses the need for a “good opener” to not only “imply the stakes” and summarize the terms of one's

argument, but also to answer the fundamental question: “Why should you spend your time reading this?” The conversation goes on to address the importance of transitions in writing, bad habits like verbosity or “officialese” and corporate double-speak, and how good writing that appears effortless is actually hard work. And as anyone who has sampled the prose of either Wallace or Garner knows, communicating plainly and effectively also means being able to draw upon an ample vocabulary and achieve an “elegant variation” in word choice so that the reader's eyes don't glaze over.

Wallace's and Garner's passion for good writing is not just for those who excel at it but is for dedicated teachers of it as well. At the time of this interview, Wallace was the Roy E. Disney Professor of Creative Writing at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif. Garner, of course, has taught countless lawyers through his published writings and his training firm LawProse, and he currently serves as Distinguished Research Professor of Law at Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law.

Yet beyond the passion for good writing that crackles through this book and the nuggets of wisdom it offers, *Quack This Way* has an elegiac undercurrent. Wallace, who suffered from depression for at least the final 20 years of his life, committed suicide on Sept. 12, 2008 (his posthumously published novel *The Pale King* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2012). While Garner laments that his late friend didn't find “the hope within himself” that Wallace gave to so many others through his writing, Garner constructively channeled that grief to help establish the David Foster Wallace literary archives at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin (proceeds from the book's sale are dedicated to this fund). Any reader of *Quack This Way* or any of Wallace's other writings would agree that it is a legacy well worth maintaining. To watch an online interview between Garner and Wallace, go to lawprose.org/interviews. **TBJ**



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